

Voids Review

July 2018 – June 2019

Prepared by:

Scrutiny Team

Introduction and Objectives

Having completed an End of Tenancy review in 2018 the Scrutiny Team felt this had highlighted the need for a review into Void procedures. Scopes identified were the policies and procedures affecting empty Selwood properties, administration of voids, the implementation of the Lettable Standard by Silcoa operatives and customer satisfaction feedback. There were two main points of focus:

- Void Turnaround time
- Lettable Standards
- Customer Satisfaction

We were interested in the way processes operated, balancing the business need and legal requirements for Void properties, with an understanding of the information available to and expectations of new tenants against the existing Lettable Standard.

The objectives were to:

- To examine and review the Empty Homes Policy, Leaflets, Website and procedures to ascertain effectiveness, value for money, ease of use, clarity, objectivity, accessibility and fairness.
- To inspect a sample of properties that become void in a four week period, from the time keys are returned and the property is empty, through the stages of pre, mid and post inspection, until the property is fit for let.
- As part of a benchmarking exercise, to contrast the letting standards with other housing associations and compare void time, value for money, incentives and tenant information.
- To focus on the void service offered by Silcoa and to consider staff views of the void process The views of the Letting Manager would also be useful.
- To interview a sample of new tenants after they had moved into a property, to gain their views on the standard of the property and how any queries were managed.
- To clarify the Void Recharges Procedure, regarding how it affects the departing tenant and how the details are communicated.
- For the Scrutiny Team to draft a final report.
- For learning outcomes from the review to be fed back to the relevant areas of the organisation.
- For any action plan to be monitored by the relevant Selwood/Silcoa teams and the Scrutiny Team

Review Process

The Scrutiny Team undertook the following actions:

- 1.** The Scrutiny Team explored the existing written policies and procedures in relation to Void properties and undertook a review of the leaflets and website information.

- 2.** A benchmarking exercise was undertaken in order to identify positives and negatives against a selection from 19 housing associations of a similar size to Selwood.

- 3.** The Scrutiny Team spent time with the Voids Team and operatives both in office and on site. Properties were visited pre, mid and post void works with the Voids Supervisor.

- 4.** Members of the Scrutiny Team interviewed the Group Asset Director, Head of Operations, Lettings Team Supervisor, Voids Supervisor, Administration staff, Operatives and a cross section of Customers.

Findings

1. Policy, Leaflets and Website and Processes

1.1. The Scrutiny Team explored the existing written Empty Homes Policy, Leaflets, Website and Processes in relation to Void properties.

In the main the Scrutiny Team found the Empty Homes Policy to be a comprehensive and efficient policy document. However, some queries have been highlighted over tenant information and involvement

- ***Tenant Benefits*** - *(the policy) Ensures that a well defined standard is in place so that tenants know what to expect from one of our homes.*
- ***In Underpinning Principles*** - *To ensure that information on our re-let standard is clearly communicated to tenants and prospective tenants.*

The Scrutiny Team is concerned as to when a new tenant receives this information – on moving in (handbook) or in advance at sign-up and is this via a leaflet or do they need to access online?

Is it the case that paper leaflets are being phased out in favour of online information?

The leaflet ‘The Selwood Homes Standard’ is still available in reception but does not cover ‘What You Can Expect from Your New Home’

1.2. Regarding tenant involvement, the following are from the Empty Homes Policy:

- ***Underpinning Principles*** – *To respond to the needs of elderly and vulnerable tenants who require greater assistance to settle into and live in our homes.*
- ***Responsibilities*** – *Will ensure that opportunities for tenant involvement with empty homes are maximised.*
- ***Policy Implementation*** – *Any particular requirements of the incoming tenant that need to be catered for.*
.....If any follow on works are due to take place then the tenant will be given full information on these and when they can expect the works to be completed.

The Scrutiny Team is concerned that in cases of special or specific need, not all customers are being served as the Policy might intend. In customer interviews, a

tenant had children with special needs as well as her own mental health issues. She had requirements that were not considered in her new tenancy and many issues outstanding with no idea of when they would be resolved.

See Appendix 1.

1.3. Regarding the leaflet *What You Can Expect From Your New Home* –

online version

- *Decoration* – we will prepare and clean affected surfaces to a standard that allows straightforward redecoration by the incoming tenant if decorations are unacceptable. **or**

paper version

- *Prepare and clean relevant surfaces to a standard that allows you to redecorate if you want to*

Scrutiny Team witnessed walls that had been painted without any kind of sanding or skimming so old paint patterns were visible. Also sills and skirting boards were sanded before glossing only to provide a key but not necessarily to an expected standard of finish.

The Team is interested to know when the new tenant receives the leaflet, *What You Can Expect From Your New Home*, as currently it would seem they do not get to read this until after they have moved in as it is part of the Tenant Handbook or on the Website and there could be a difference in interpretation of the Lettable Standard. This can create a situation of false expectation on the part of the customer and which may in turn generate complaints.

2. Void times and Costs

2.1 Silcoa appears to tally agreeably with other Housing Associations for days turn around and average cost per property in the Voids sector.

The turn around time from receiving keys to being ready for new tenants (key to key) is currently 19.9 days (target 24) and average cost £2200 (target £1803). In comparison we found other associations with a turn around, key to key of 12 days and others of 32 days. Average cost to void works varied between £2800 and upwards to £9000 in extreme cases.

2.2 In comparing Lettable standards the Team found Selwood's standard to be comprehensive. On the other hand, the personal expectations of the tenants were considerably higher as evidenced in Appendix 1. This was found to be common among other Housing Associations contacted.

2.3 Some associations provide room layout/floor plans with varying degrees of success.

2.4 Photographs of how a property should be left were often used to assist customers in the avoidance of recharges.

3. Void Inspections

Two members of the Scrutiny Team experienced both ends of the spectrum as regards conditions of void properties. One property visited at first inspection was declared excellent with no work needed. Another was, to our eyes in good repair but for a few minor and easy to remedy issues. Conversely, we visited a property void as a result of eviction and subsequently abandonment so therefore still containing all personal effects. Other properties viewed had repairs requiring various levels of work and attention. We visited properties at pre, mid and post inspection stages and were particularly impressed with the dedication of the operatives, considering some of the things they have to deal with.

4. Staff and Customer Interviews

4.1 Staff

Scrutiny Team members met with all Management, Administration and many Operatives in the course of this review. All the staff members interviewed were extremely dedicated and knowledgeable about the entire Voids process and were open to offering ideas to improve and streamline the service. For example the spreadsheet created in order to liaise with the Lettings Team to speed up the process.

There appears to be a good relationship between administrative staff and on-site operatives, although the lack of a permanent senior administrator was apparent and the team felt this could be detrimental to the overall smooth-running of the operation. Highlighted was a lack of a dedicated plumber and gas engineer which caused on-site frustration and delays.

Two members of the Scrutiny Team were invited to attend the Toolbox Talk and welcomed by all present, including six operatives, two of whom were quite new to Silcoa. The meeting was a comprehensive schedule of performance, technical and compliance updates, training available, compliments and complaints, the van stock project and many operational matters. All operatives were given the opportunity to air any issues and had queries heard and discussed, including the move to Avro Way and supplier efficiency.

4.2 Customers

Two members of the Team carried out telephone interviews with a total of five tenants out from a list of twelve provided. Properties concerned were across the spectrum of Flat, House, Bungalow, Sheltered. The shortfall in responses was for various reasons e.g. language difficulties, unavailable numbers and unanswered calls.

The approach taken was in identifying the fact that we were also tenants, enabling those interviewed to feel at ease and to answer freely and openly.

The results varied widely with three of the five responses being extremely content with their new home and all aspects of the moving in process as well as the standard of the property they had found. For these three, any small problems had been dealt with quickly and efficiently.

However, the remaining two customers had several issues arising which had adversely affected their moving in experience and their opinion of Selwood. Appendix 1 has covered one of the tenants concerned, another customer reported problems with faulty taps, leaking sink, kitchen cupboard misalignment, mould and faulty intercom. Although all these issues were solved within a week, the customer felt he “should never have been allowed to move in until the problems had been sorted”.

See Appendix 2 for questions created by the team.

Recommendations

1)

a) Scrutiny Team would like to see consistent and concise information for tenants to match across all leaflets and website.

b) For a continued availability in paper/ leaflet form where internet access is either not available or customers are not IT literate.

2) The team would recommend that the **What You Can Expect From Your New Home** information is provided to the prospective tenant before they move in.

3) The team recommends that on a trial basis, Selwood provides room layout/floor plans to prospective tenants in an attempt to avoid refusals and improve acceptance

4) The team feels it might be beneficial to provide photographs of a home displaying the lettable standard as set out by Selwood. Provided to both incoming and departing tenants, these could help to normalise customer expectations and to avoid recharges.

5) While it is accepted the current admin staff arrangement works well, the Scrutiny team feels it would be highly beneficial for a permanent administrator to be in place.

6) The team feels that the provision of a permanent plumber and gas engineer would greatly enhance the flow of the void process.

7) The Scrutiny team recommends and requests that in future reviews where customer interviews are proposed, that it has free access to a list of appropriate tenants from which a selection may be made totally independently and randomly.

8) The team recommends that questions asked of tenants by Customer Service after moving in, be better tailored to give more accurate feedback. **See appendix 2**

9) The Scrutiny Team recommends greater emphasis on allocation of appropriate properties to those with special needs, disabilities, vulnerability and age with reference to the Empty Homes Policy.

10) The Team believes there is scope for an incentive scheme as in place with other housing associations. For example a £20 Argos voucher is given at first inspection if the property meets the standard and a possible cheque for £100 for the property returned cleaned and all rubbish removed. This could reduce the need for recharges to be incurred and for a maximum £120 outlay, reduce the key to key time and void costs of turn around.

The Scrutiny Team would like to acknowledge and thank all staff and customers who gave their time and information willingly and cooperatively to this review.

Scrutiny members invested 330 hours on this review

This Voids review was commenced in July 2018 but halted in the autumn when team members were asked to take part in other projects